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ABSTRACT

Intentional changes over the past two years in the lives of 45 women and men in Toronto were examined through interviews involving extensive probing and dialogue. The intentional changes turned out to be mostly through self-help. It was largely the person herself or himself who chose, planned, and implemented the change. The person often obtained significant help from friends and other peers, but only rarely from professionals or books. On four measures of magnitude and success, the changes were generally rated quite high regardless of whether or not they involved professional help. Results indicated that changes clustered into seven areas of life, involving: (1) job, training, or education; (2) human relationships, emotions, and self-perception; (3) enjoyable activities; (4) residential location; (5) body and physical health; (6) basic knowledge or skill in diverse situations; and (7) personal finances and home maintenance. (Author)

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THE LARGEST INTENTIONAL CHANGE DURING THE PAST TWO YEARS

Allen Tough

What intentional changes do people select as their largest and most significant? Who is largely responsible for choosing, planning, and achieving these changes? How do professional facilitators of change fit in? And just how successful are the changes?

We probed and listened at some length as 45 women and men gave their responses to these questions. A fascinating fresh picture of intentional change emerged as a result. In my opinion, significant intentional change is a highly appropriate, comprehensive, and powerful focus for research.

Insights into adults' natural on-going efforts to produce change in themselves and their lives can lead to useful implications for professional helpers. If we want to improve the effectiveness of our helping enterprise, it makes sense to study the phenomenon we are trying to facilitate. Seen through the eyes of the person, how do we as professionals now fit into the person's efforts to change? And how could we become even more useful?

In our interviews, we included only intentional changes. That is, the person made a definite decision to change in a particular direction. The

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decision was made fairly freely: being fired or accidentally becoming pregnant would not count as intentional changes. The person then took one or more definite steps to achieve the change: the person did something, rather than passively sitting back and letting the change occur.

We include only the portion of the change that was both chosen and achieved. We exclude all change that was chosen but has not yet been achieved. And we exclude all change that has in fact been achieved, but was not clearly a part of the original decision.

During the first few minutes of the interview, we helped the person select the largest, most important change during the past two years. To increase our chances of getting an accurate response, we helped the person's recall by using two handout sheets along with several minutes of dialog and probing. Figure 1 shows the first handout sheet. The second sheet listed a wide variety of possible intentional changes to stimulate the person's memory.

Changes are complex, many-faceted, and intertwined. As a result, there are usually several ways of viewing and defining the focus of a change. We often had to help the person work out the most accurate focus.

The interviews were conducted in Toronto, a thriving city of two million persons. We tried to tap the entire adult population of Toronto, age 25 and over, with as little bias as possible. People were chosen at random from the municipal voters' list and from the telephone book. We excluded persons in nursing homes, and persons who could not speak English well enough to be interviewed. The 45 persons who were successfully interviewed came from various walks of life, from all age ranges between 25 and 85, and from less than grade 10 education to graduate degrees. In social class, age, and educational level, the sample was reasonably representative of Toronto's

From all of your intentional changes during the past two years, please select your largest, most important change. If in doubt between two changes, choose the one that will affect you and your life the most, or the one that will last the longest.

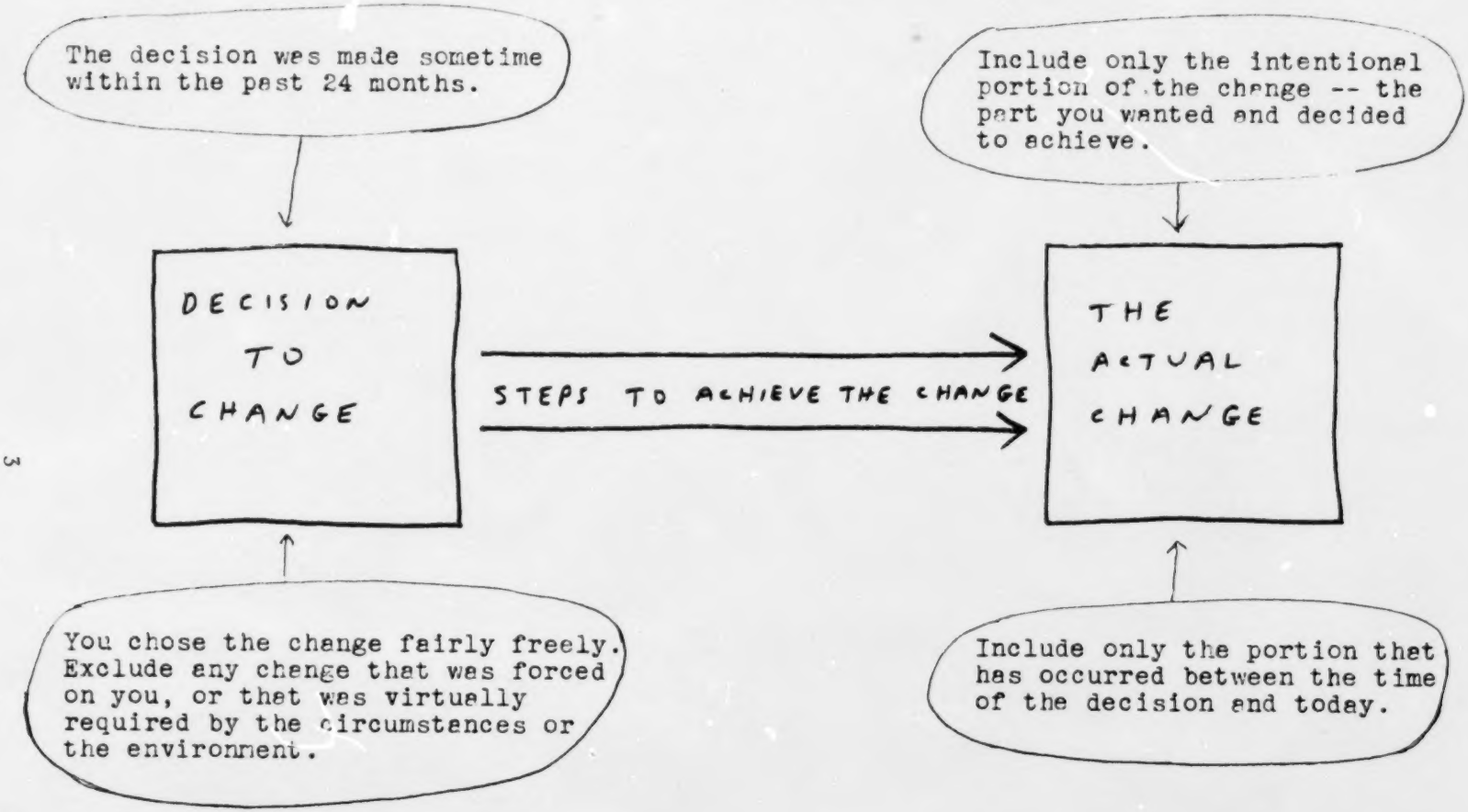
The decision was made sometime within the past 24 months.
Include only the intentional portion of the change -- the part you wanted and decided to achieve.
DECISION TO CHANGE
STEPS TO ACHIEVE THE CHANGE
THE ACTUAL CHANGE
You chose the change fairly freely. Exclude any change that was forced on you, or that was virtually required by the circumstances or the environment.
Include only the portion that has occurred between the time of the decision and today.

Figure 1. Interview handout sheet #1.

total adult population. But I made an error in strategy that resulted in far more women than men in the sample.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

Intentional changes are mostly do-it-yourself. It is largely the person herself or himself who chooses, plans, and implements the change. The person often obtains significant help from friends and other peers, but only rarely from professionals and books.

These insights emerged from asking our interviewees to decide who performed each of three major tasks: (1) choosing, (2) planning, and (3) achieving the change. The first task was described in more detail as "making the initial choice of this particular change, and the decision to proceed with it." The second task was "deciding how to achieve the change; planning the strategy; deciding how to deal with problems along the way." And the third was "taking the steps for achieving the change; that is, actually doing whatever is necessary for achieving it."

A handout sheet gave the person those descriptions of the three tasks and a list of six possibilities for who might have performed each task. For each task in turn, the person was asked, "How would you divide the credit or responsibility for performing this task? That is, what percentage of the task was performed by you, and what percentage by each of the others in the list?"

Lumping together the percentages for all three tasks, the mean percentage for the interviewees themselves was 76%. In the typical intentional change, then, the person is responsible for about 76% of the choosing, planning, and implementing. In many changes it is 100% of course, and certainly the most common situation is for the person to retain much more than half the

responsibility for the entire change process. The opposite extreme -- when someone else is dominant -- occurs only rarely: 9% of the time for planning the strategy, and much less for the other two tasks. In about 22% of all changes, though, the responsibilities are shared by two or more persons with no one dominant.

Eighty-two percent of the interviewees gave credit to one or more peers for helping to perform the task. Specifically, peers were described as "one or more friends, relatives, acquaintances, co-workers, or neighbors -- in individual one-to-one interaction (possibly with one or two other persons also present)." The total amount of responsibility accounted for by peers was 16%, far higher than any other category except the interviewees themselves.

The other four categories were used only rarely, and consequently accounted for only a small percentage of the responsibility for performing the tasks. My predictions before the interviews were far too high for these four categories, and far too low for the category of the person herself or himself. The category of "books, booklets, magazines, other printed material, television, films, tapes, cassettes, phonograph records" accounted for only 2% in Table 1. And peer groups ("a group of people who met fairly regularly, and who almost always met without a professional or expert as the leader or resource person") accounted for only 2%.

Table 1

Who Performed the Tasks of Choosing the Change,

Planning the Strategy, and Achieving the Change?

Resource	Mean percentage
The person himself or herself	76
Peers one-to-one	16
Peer groups	2
Books and other nonhuman resources	2
Professionals one-to-one	3
Professionals in a group	1

Note. Each of the 45 interviewees gave percentages separately for each of the three tasks, but for this table the data from the three tasks were combined.

The other two categories involved "a person who was paid to help, or was doing so as part of his or her job, or was designated by some organization to help, or was trained to help." We might loosely call such a person a professional helper -- a person who was paid, employed, designated, or trained to help. In individual one-to-one interaction they accounted for 3% of the total responsibility, but only 1% as a leader or speaker in a group situation.

Only a small proportion of intentional changes rely much on a professional helper. Clearly professional help is not the central core of most changes. It is simply one facet of some change projects.

When it is present, though, professional help can make an important contribution. The instructor in an evening course on Jung, for example,

and then a Jungian analyst in private sessions were useful in helping an art consultant "to understand Jung's thought and myself." A psychiatrist helped a mother become willing to let her 18-year-old daughter marry and make her own decisions. A diet workshop was useful to one woman, and a general practitioner medical doctor persuaded another woman to quit smoking. One mother (trying to change her relationship with her two teenagers) received helpful advice from a teacher at her son's secondary school. On the job, two women were helped by their supervisor or personnel manager to improve their responsibilities or title.

On four measures of the magnitude and success of the change, the changes with significant professional help were about the same as other changes or a little higher. Changes with professional help are not dramatically better or more successful than other intentional changes, nor do changes that are 100% self-guided turn out to be particularly inferior or ineffective.

Professional help played a less central role in certain other changes. It was useful in them, but somehow not at the core. For example, two persons used a realtor and a lawyer while buying or selling property, and another person used professional movers. Medical doctors were used by two women who decided to have a baby. As part of enlarging her horizons and social life, one woman attended a community college cooking class but found it was "terrible."

AREAS OF CHANGE

Let us turn now to the various areas or spheres of life in which intentional changes occur.

Through experimenting with various ways of clustering 89 changes written on slips of paper, I developed a set of seven areas of change. The 89

changes came from our 45 randomly-selected Toronto adults, another 31 partial interviews in Toronto, and 13 partial interviews in Vancouver. Shorthand labels for the seven areas of change are given in Table 2: fuller descriptions are provided in the text.

Table 2

Areas in Which Changes Occur

Area	Percentage[a]
Job, training, and education	34
Human relationships, emotions, and self-perception	27
Enjoyable activities	15
Where live	9
Body and physical health	7
Basic knowledge or skill for diverse situations	6
Personal finances and home maintenance	2

[a]Estimated percentage of Toronto adults, age 25 and over, whose largest, most important change in the past two years would fall primarily within the given area.

Each change area in Table 2 is a reasonably distinct area or sphere of life. The one exception to this is "basic knowledge or skill for diverse situations," which by definition cuts across several areas of life.

The right-hand column of Table 2 is my best estimate of the percentage of changes falling into each area in a total adult population. We cannot yet be very certain of these percentages because no large-scale survey has been conducted. But my guess is that the percentages obtained from a very large

rigorous survey would not vary dramatically from Table 2.

Job, Training, and Education

Here, in decreasing order of frequency, are the changes that people achieved in this area:

-- moved from one job to another (or to paid employment after several years without paid employment);
-- gained the competence required for a new job or occupation;
-- shifted responsibilities within the same position;
-- quit job (to stay at home with a young child, for example);
-- began a vigorous campaign to obtain a better job;
-- obtained salary and title more in line with actual responsibilites;
-- increased the amount of time devoted to job or training;
-- adopted fresh strategies within the job.

Human Relationships, Emotions, and Self-perception

A great variety of changes fall into this area, yet they seem remarkably similar and related. It would be difficult to divide this area into two distinct categories.

Many persons report changes in their closest existing human relationships. They changed how they relate to a parent, spouse, or child. An 83-year-old man stopped handing over large sums of money whenever his 56-year-old son needed it. Other parents reduced their efforts to influence their children as they reached their late teens, or changed their child-raising approach with younger children. One man became more involved with his family and spent less time drinking beer with friends.

It is very common these days for people to try to improve their primary relationship. Some do so through developing their acceptance of

their own feelings, others through changing their sexual behavior, others through decreasing sex-role stereotypes, and so on.

Another kind of change involves moving someone into or out of a central place in one's life. People decide to have or adopt a child, for example, or to separate from their spouse, or to begin a new primary relationship, or to have a particular person as best friend. Because her 92-year-old father was becoming too great a drain while living with her and her husband, one interviewee put him into a nursing home -- and reported her benefits as "happier husband, happier me, relief, less stress, more time".

Rather than changing some particular relationship, many persons set out to change in more general ways within the area of human relationships, emotions, and self-perception. Some gain self-awareness and self-insight, and some gain greater self-esteem or self-confidence. Possibly as a result (or possibly in order to change self-image and opinion of others), some persons change their appearance, clothing style, car style, or name. People also report becoming more assertive, more willing to follow their own interests rather than always pleasing others, or freer from attitudes and behavior that are sex-role stereotyped. Two interviewees chose a personal change path (individual psychotherapy and a gestalt group) as their most important change.

Enjoyable Activities

Enjoyable activities can include social activities, travel, crafts, art, theatre, music, circle of friends, sport, hobby, recreational activities, hiking, and sailing. Several interviewees told of adding, expanding, modifying, or "becoming more involved in" such activities.

For enjoyment plus a desire to help others, one can engage in volunteer helping activities. This could be listed as a separate area, but also fits

well here, partly because it involves changes in the voluntary uses of one's free time (time not spent working, maintaining one's body or home, etc.). This area includes volunteer activities to help other individuals, volunteer activities to improve the local community or the world, and social action. A self-employed 46-year-old woman "became more giving of time, energy, and understanding. I try to spend 60% of my time giving out. I consciously make two phone calls or visits every week to an elderly or sick person, baby-sit, and generally try to be supportive to people." A 72-year-old retired editor went with her sister-in-law to a Catholic charismatic movement service, and then "I began trying to model myself after the other members, who show great depth of charity to others." She now does some errands for the senior citizens near her home, and drives one woman to stores and appointments.

Where Live

During a two-year period, a person may move from one home to another and yet not select that as the largest change. Moving from one apartment to another, for instance, might be a fairly small change. When moving to a new job and city simultaneously, the person might find the job change far outweighs the residence change. For about 9% of people, though, a change in residence is the largest most important change in a two-year period.

A change in residence can also involve some change in one's living arrangements. In addition to the new physical surroundings and neighborhood, one might simultaneously be sharing space with new people or be living alone for the first time. Particular interviewees reported moving from an apartment to a house (this 30-year-old woman then felt "more grown-up: an adult citizen"), from a house with relatives to a bachelor apartment, from

her own apartment to her daughter's family home, and into a nursing home chosen by herself. For two persons, the main change was to live apart from someone (from two adult sons often visited by the interviewee's estranged husband, and from a parent).

Body and Physical Health

Within this area, losing weight and becoming physically fit (through jogging or yoga) were the most common changes. A woman with arthritis of the spine went to a different doctor. Another woman, who had smoked for 40 years, very consciously "chose life" (partly because of what she had to give to other people as well as for her own sake) "by throwing away my cigarettes, ashtrays, and lighters."

Basic Knowledge or Skill for Diverse Situations

Sometimes a person sets out to improve some definite skill or competence for use in diverse or unknown future situations. The skill is definite and specific, but its probable uses do not fit neatly into just one of the areas in Table 2. (In my conception of this area, I explicitly exclude job competence, interpersonal skills, skill at some enjoyable activity, or any other skill that fits largely within some other category in Table 2.) Possible illustrations: reading skill, effective writing, speaking ability, vocabulary, arithmetic, first aid, thinking, creative problem-solving, managing one's time, setting goals, planning one's life, maintaining an appropriate pace in life.

People can also increase their basic knowledge or understanding of some broad or significant area that does not fit neatly into some other category in Table 2. Possible examples: knowledge of the world; knowledge of history or the future or social sciences or geography or cultures; basic insights and

perspective; spiritual growth; insights concerning the meaning and purpose of life; expanded consciousness; psychic realms; ultimate reality; relationship to God, cosmos, or nature.

Personal Finances and Home Maintenance

This area includes changes in personal finances or property, home furnishing and maintenance, sewing, car maintenance, and similar responsibilities. Through the support of a peer self-help group, for instance, one man successfully shifted from living on credit and in debt to using only cash. Another man selected his newly-acquired skill in woodworking as his most important change.

Reflecting on the Changes

At an early stage in the project, I tried to predict the sorts of changes our interviews would uncover. Looking back now at that early list, I realize everything on it was a single neat clearly-defined event. Having a baby. Switching to another job. Moving. In fact, many changes turn out to be not so clear-cut. For many persons, the largest change is not a single change at all, but a close-knit cluster of intertwined changes. One suburban housewife, for example, moved with her family to the center of the city, began a career there, and consequently altered her relationship with her husband. Other changes are largely internal (psychological or spiritual) rather than external. And some are a particular theme or direction that underlies changed behavior. Examples of themes or directions: more independent; more assertive; more direct in communicating feelings; "realize and use my own power;" more spontaneous.

Many changes could be intended in either direction. For example, one of our interviewees increased the amount of time spent at work and two

reduced it. One mother stopped "sitting on my tongue" with her children and another stopped speaking up about her daughter's decisions. Other intended changes would almost always be in one direction, not the opposite direction. It is hard to imagine someone setting out deliberately to become less self-confident, less physically fit, less knowledgeable about the world, or less skilled at something.

HOW LARGE AND BENEFICIAL?

Just how large and significant a change does a person achieve in two years or less? Very few changes were at the trivial or Mickey Mouse end of the continuum. On the other hand, few changes involved basic personality change, a fundamental shift in worldview, or significant spiritual growth or consciousness expansion. In short, the changes were definitely large and important, but rarely matched the stated goals of long-term psychotherapy, the human growth movement, or transpersonal education.

One of our questions asked people directly about the magnitude of the change they had selected for the interview. From a list of four responses, we asked people, "Which response comes closest to describing the size and importance of your change (or of the intended portion)?" In reply, 42% said "a huge or enormous change, or of central importance in my life," 29% said "a fairly large and important change," 24% said "a definite change with some relevance and importance in my life," and only 4% said "small, trivial, petty, unimportant." Most persons, then, do achieve quite a large significant change over a period of two years, according to their own assessment.

I interviewed my two children to get some quick idea of how their intentional changes would compare with adult changes. I was struck by how small and unimportant their changes were. They simply lacked the opportunity

and the power to initiate particularly large changes. As I reflected on this, I began to wonder whether older adults as well as children would be restricted in their potential for large changes. Our data suggest this may be true, at least for many adults over 64. Dividing our sample into two age groups -- 64 and under, and 65 plus -- a striking difference does appear. Only 21% of the younger group's changes fell into the two lower categories, and all of these were in the second lowest category, whereas the figure was 83% for the older group.

The magnitude of the changes does not vary much by social class nor by the areas of change listed in Table 2. The only exception was a tendency for changes in the job area to be larger than other areas.

We also asked people to tell us "How much has this change contributed to your happiness, your satisfaction with life, or your well-being?" "An enormous amount" was chosen by 16%, "a large amount" by 44%, "some definite benefit" by 31%, "little or nothing" by 7%, and "it has done me more harm than good" by one person.

Here is the next question we asked. "Now let's imagine a certain situation for a moment. Let's imagine that you describe your change to all your friends, relatives, neighbors, people at work, and everyone else who knows you. Approximately how many people would already be aware of your change? In other words, suppose you went around asking people, 'Have you noticed this change in me?' Approximately how many would say yes?" The median was seven persons, though 44% of the interviewees said more than ten persons.

Finally, we were interested in whether the changes were beneficial just to the interviewee, or to other persons as well. "Let's set aside your own benefits for a moment, and look at any benefits for other people.

Your change might be of some benefit to your family, your friends and relatives, your boss, other people in your organization, colleagues in your field, and so on. To what extent has your change provided some benefit to people other than yourself?" Only 20% said "only to a small extent," 38% said "medium amount; of some definite benefit to at least one or two persons," and 42% chose "to a fairly large extent." Obviously major changes are not nearly as selfish as some critics suggest when they dismiss all personal change efforts as "useless navel-gazing" and "irrelevant for the rest of society." This charge may be particularly absurd when leveled at the area of human relationships, emotions, and self-perception: in this area 85% found their change was of some definite benefit to others.

Only eight persons were less than 50% responsible for planning or achieving their change. I would have guessed that turning more than half of the responsibility over to peers or a professional would have led to a particularly large and beneficial change. But on all four measures of magnitude and benefit, this group of eight persons was clearly lower than the total sample.

Some interviewees were quite self-deprecating about the size of their changes, though they usually felt much more positive by the end of the interview. An earlier study found a similar phenomenon (Tough, 1967, p. 40). Only one potential interviewee maintained that she had not achieved any changes at all over the two years. She was a 61-year-old upper-middle-class woman with above average education. Throughout the attempted interview and a later telephone conversation she insisted that she had "absolutely no changes -- not even my brand of soap or my style of clothes." The interviewer, a strong feminist, was quite upset by this woman, especially when it became evident that her husband made almost all the decisions for both of them.

We asked people to compare their originally-chosen change and their actually-achieved change -- the two squares in Figure 1. More than half the interviewees had achieved 100% of their desired change, but a few had achieved only 50% or even less. The average amount achieved was 81%. Some persons changed even more than originally anticipated, but we studied only the portion that was definitely chosen.

It would be interesting to know what proportion of major changes are intentional, and what proportion are caused by external events, maturation, subconscious influences, and chance. The common stereotype of individual human change is that it is largely beyond the person's choice and control: it just happens. By the end of a great many long interviews I have seen this stereotype shattered as the person recalls more and more active, deliberate, planful, successful efforts to bring about major changes. Unfortunately we have virtually no large-scale in-depth research to illuminate this question. One small study (cited in Tough, 1971, p. 29) found more than 50% of important changes were intentional. And Posluns (1978), studying women's changes toward freedom from sex-role stereotypes, found that 68% of their changes were deliberate and only 32% "just happened."

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